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“One does what one can (*on fait ce qu'on peut*)”:
Joseph Conrad as Translator¹

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's fiction – *Lord Jim* especially – contains several instances of characters struggling with translation, or with foreign languages more generally, or transferring speech or syntactic patterns from one language to another. These features have much to suggest about Conrad's own multilingual early life and his eventual adoption of English for his writing. They also have wider implications concerning his vision and tactics as a novelist – including his reliance on French fiction, and his regular emphases on cultural difference and on the cognitive and epistemological challenges of communicating experience. These challenges, in turn, initiate or anticipate concerns widely apparent in modernist fiction, indicating stresses in an advancing, globalised modernity which made its innovations so necessary. Appreciating Conrad's interest in translation elucidates and confirms Fredric Jameson's judgement of his writing as a key factor in the emergence of modernism in the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, translation, *Lord Jim*, French language, modernism, globalisation

Joseph Conrad's success as a novelist is scarcely owed to talent as a humourist. His friend and collaborator Ford Madox Ford considered Conrad “an unshakeable pessimist,” and critics have usually seen pessimism and tragedy predominating in his writing – its mood summed up by one recent commentator, Maya Jasanoff, as “perpetually depressed, incorrigibly cynical” (Ford 250; Jasanoff 11). Yet Conrad can be comic on occasion: in his ironic – or just “incorrigibly cynical” – descriptions of the so-called anarchists in *The Secret Agent* (1907), for example. There is also at least one genuinely funny moment in *Lord Jim* (1900), when the novel's narrator, Marlow, encounters a half-caste sea-captain whose

"flowing English seemed to be derived from a dictionary compiled by a lunatic." Marlow's narrative records several examples of the captain's "absurd chatter," including his judgement "that the Rajah was a 'laughable hyaena' (can't imagine how he got hold of hyaenas)." Relishing "the undeniable effect of his phraseology," the captain goes on to describe "somebody else [as] many times falser than the 'weapons of a crocodile'" (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 182, 183).

Mistranslations or verbal confusions of this kind are a perennial source of humour, like examination 'howlers': almost any centre of English philology, in universities around the world, can readily provide its own list of favourite local examples. Malapropisms, spoonerisms, and foreign characters' misfortunes with the English language also have a long provenance and a continuing currency, domestically, in English comedy. In the recent history of popular entertainment, too, that "dictionary compiled by a lunatic" has a particular resonance: with the "Hungarian phrasebook" episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* – the innovative, anarchic comedy series which enthralled BBC television audiences at the end of the 1960s. The episode concerned follows the publication – for reasons never much clarified, though possibly criminal – of a Hungarian-English phrasebook which includes the translation of "a box of matches, please" as "my hovercraft is full of eels." For anyone who remembers *Monty Python* (rarely repeated nowadays on British television), mention of hovercrafts and eels still inspires cheerful recollection of one of the series' most celebrated sketches.

Sharing a form of humour current later in the twentieth century, and in the twenty-first, that "laughable hyena" and related verbal lunacies in *Lord Jim* might simply allow Conrad to be considered less comprehensively serious and gloomy. Marlow's encounter with the verbose captain nevertheless has serious, instructive implications for Conrad's life and fiction – also more generally, for the modernist writing which often followed his work. As Marlow opines, it is indeed hard to see how the captain could have "got hold of hyaenas." Yet it is easy enough – at any rate for anyone familiar with French – to recognise why he might have invoked "the weapons of a crocodile." The old adage about "crocodile tears" figures in French as *larmes de crocodile*. This might

readily be confused with *armes de crocodile*, which would translate into English as the arms, or weapons, of a crocodile.

For Conrad, fluent in French before learning English, confusions of this kind would have been familiar, or easily imagined. They might also have been potentially troubling. With Polish as his first language, and French as his second, the obligation to work in English throughout his maritime career, and later his literary one, naturally entailed concerns about the accuracy or appropriateness of his expression. As late as 1907, even after the publication of some of his most successful fiction, he continued to explain that “English is still for me a foreign language whose handling requires a phenomenal effort” (Conrad, *Collected Letters* IV, 401). Throughout his writing career, Conrad remained concerned that readers and reviewers might judge this “phenomenal effort” to have been incompletely successful, or consider him only “a sort of freak, an amazing bloody foreigner writing in English” (Conrad, *Collected Letters* III, 488). His response was always to insist that he had eventually come to think in English, and that “at sea and on land my point of view is English” (Conrad, *Collected Letters* III, 89).

Contrary to the concerns of reviewers – even his own – Conrad’s long-deferred encounter with the English language may in several ways have enhanced his imagination, facilitating productive engagement with points of view *not* exclusively English. In one obvious way, fluency in French put him directly in touch with writing – some of it innovative enough not to have been much matched in other literatures – which eventually proved useful for his own fiction. As several critics have noted – Yves Hervouet, extensively, in *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* (1990) – Conrad may have gained substantially from the example of Gustave Flaubert, and particularly, in writing *Lord Jim*, from *Madame Bovary* (1856). The two novels are analogous in theme, describing romantic, idealistic central figures: Emma Bovary, seduced by the supposed exaltations of relationships and passion; Jim, by those of heroic action and lofty self-image. As *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* demonstrates, Conrad may have been further indebted to Flaubert for certain habits of style, and even for some much more direct appropriations. Hervouet carefully traces how closely – at times word-for-

word – passages in *Nostromo* (1904) follow Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869), notably in Conrad's descriptions of the physical appearance of Linda Viola. Like many critics, Hervouet shares Maya Jasanoff's view that Conrad's fiction is "short on plausible female characters," suggesting that Conrad may have been aware of limitations in this area himself, turning to Flaubert for convenient assistance (Jasanoff 12).

Conrad, at any rate, can be considered a translator not only in the broad, metaphoric sense of assimilating aspects of Flaubert's characterisation, themes and style. He can also be seen working in the narrower, literal sense of translation in directly rendering a piece of Flaubert's description into his fiction in English. A practitioner of translation in this way, Conrad sometimes also makes translation a specific subject in his novels. As well as Marlow's bizarre encounter with the half-caste captain, several other episodes in *Lord Jim* highlight rhetorical processes involved in translation, and their implications for representing and comprehending experience. These interests figure at length in Marlow's conversation – occupying much of Chapters 12 and 13 – with "an elderly French lieutenant" who remembers rescuing the *Patna*, the pilgrim ship Jim has disgracefully abandoned (107). The Frenchman's side of this conversation is represented in a distinctive register nevertheless hard to interpret confidently in terms of its nature and locutionary origins. Some of it suggests that Marlow records the lieutenant's own narrative, delivered by him in broken English, occasionally lapsing back into French, and marked throughout by constructions and idioms carried over from that language. More probably, readers are supposed to imagine Marlow doing his best to translate the lieutenant's views, albeit into a rather Frenchified English, while occasionally recording his original expressions intact. In the statement that the ship's passengers "were beginning to agitate themselves," for example, the lieutenant's original French – presumably *ils commençaient à s'agiter* – remains distinctly audible, or imaginable, though not directly recorded (108). A translation soon appears side by side with the original French when the lieutenant recalls working on board the *Patna* "promptly (*en toute hâte*)" (108). Occasionally, a half-imitative English version of French expression, a translation, and the original

language all appear adjacently: for example, when the lieutenant's views – presumably including the rhetorical question *que voulez-vous* – are rendered as “‘What would you! One does what one can (*on fait ce qu'on peut*). . .’” (109).

Recalling the conversation in this way, Marlow seems to work as a kind of modestly competent simultaneous translator. In another sense, the French lieutenant offers a figuration – or at any rate a phrase – defining the position of the novelist himself. Evidence in *Lord Jim* and in his autobiographical writing suggest Conrad was a thoroughly competent English speaker who nevertheless found his imagination still holding some place – *tenant un lieu* – in relation to French literature, and to the French language which first offered him an alternative to his native Polish. Linguistic lieutenancy of this kind also figures in *Lord Jim* in relation to languages other than French. Recalling his encounter with the elderly French lieutenant, Marlow reflects on how Jim's story “seemed to live, with a sort of uncanny vitality, in the minds of men, on the tips of their tongues” (107). In describing the men and women who encounter this story, and their reactions to it, *Lord Jim* moves freely and frequently into the tongues of those involved. Speech-patterns and fragments of Malay figure throughout; one of them – “Tuan Jim,” “Lord Jim” – giving the novel its title. Stein, the wise German merchant who sends Jim to Patusan, delivers conclusions about him and about life in general in a manner nearly as bilingual as the French lieutenant's. Though his English seems more fluent, it deploys a lexis and sentence-structure likewise suggesting strenuous translation from an anterior foreign idiom. German syntax evidently underlies some of his more philosophic reflections – for example, that “‘one thing alone can us from being ourselves cure! . . . The way is to the destructive element submit yourself. . .’” (162-3). German pronunciation is also emphasised in recording his personal memories – Marlow meticulously reproducing, for example, the form and phonetics of Stein's recollection that “‘I had the love’ (he said ‘lof’) ‘of woman, a child I had, to make my heart very full’” (161).

Why does Conrad take such pains to ensure that the sound and syntax of foreign languages, lurking beneath his characters' English, is heard so clearly and so frequently in *Lord Jim*? Merely as a relic or

nervous tic, uneasily recalling his own "phenomenal effort" in moving from other languages into work in English? Maybe to an extent, though there are fuller and better explanations. Linguistic habits *Lord Jim* represents are obviously conveniently characterising, briskly distinguishing the individuals concerned and the voice and opinions of each. Yet when Marlow explains that he is "always eager to take opinion" on the frustrating enigma of Jim, he suggests that it is not just "individual opinion" but "international opinion – by Jove!" that he seeks (123). Foreign influences apparent in the broken English represented in his narrative incorporate strong suggestions of whole other cultures and of their alternative, conflicting ways of envisaging the world. The elderly lieutenant's account of rescuing the *Patna*, for example, exhibits priorities – practical, professional, even culinary – derived from French rather than British naval service, and implying at times a rigorous, almost Cartesian objectivity which allows him little sympathy with Jim. Instead, as Marlow recognises, the French lieutenant delivers "his own country's pronouncement ... in passionless and definite phraseology a machine would use, if machines could speak" (123). Stein's readier sympathy may be owed to personal factors – to some experience of a "heart very full" – but it is also shaped by a German cultural background that facilitates the generous, astute recognition that Jim is "romantic – romantic . . . And that is very bad – very bad. ... Very good, too" (165).

Despite Stein's insight, Marlow remarks of Jim that "I don't pretend I understood him. The views he let me have of himself were like . . . glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog" (62-3). In one way, the diverse, 'international' judgements acquired from the French Lieutenant, Stein, and the many other commentators figuring in the novel simply offer Marlow – and the reader – further 'rents' which might or might not help to penetrate the fog of enigma surrounding Jim's actions. Radical diversities in the judgements Marlow accumulates also have more profound implications, suggesting the relativity and subjectivity of all views of the world. Conrad implicitly emphasises this suggestion almost from the beginning of the novel, and then throughout, by relying from Chapter Four onwards not on conventional nineteenth-century authorial omniscience, but on the narrator, Marlow – and later another witness of

likewise limited understanding – to deliver most of his tale. Emphasised by this tactic, diversities between individuals, cultures, and languages throughout *Lord Jim* render unrealisable – even risible – any attempt to “see a thing as it is,” independently of the idiosyncrasies of observers and of the linguistic medium shaping what each seeks to communicate (130).

The radical uncertainty which results not only challenges attempts to ‘see’ Jim as he is, but ultimately the capacity of language itself to communicate experience or represent the world. Jim is initially astonished to find that the “official Inquiry” into his actions “wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything” (27). After this “first feeling of revolt,” he nevertheless seeks “to go on talking for truth’s sake,” believing that “only a meticulous precision of statement would bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things,” but this conviction does not endure for long (29). Instead, he concludes that he might not “ever again speak out as long as he lived. The sound of his own truthful statements confirmed his deliberate opinion that speech was of no use to him any longer” (30-31). His views prove prescient. By the end of his life, “a broad gulf that neither eye nor voice could span” seems to intervene between his experience and anything he can record about it, rendering writing as useless as speech (256). Flinging down his pen, he leaves in his journal only an “ink blot resembling the head of an arrow under [the] words,” as if his mortal danger could only be drawn rather than represented in language (256). Marlow expresses comparable doubts about the efficacy of language. After his long, inconclusive conversation with the French lieutenant, he comments on “the blight of futility that lies in wait for men’s speeches,” later remarking that “our lives are too short for that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only and abiding intention” (115, 171-2).

In *The Great Tradition* (1948), F.R. Leavis famously accused Conrad of accentuating the “inexpressible” in his writing, and of “making a virtue out of not knowing what he means” (Leavis 1962: 180). On the evidence above, Conrad might instead be praised for convincingly making a point – learned from his own multilingual background, and reinforced by polyglot encounters at sea – about the difficulties of making reliable meaning in a world of diverse languages and conflicting world views.

This linguistic and epistemological uncertainty might also in one way be related back to radical conclusions in recent philosophy. Encountering Jim's dismissal of facts, Conrad's first readers might well have recalled, for example, Nietzsche's judgement in *Human, All too Human* (1880): that "there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths" (Nietzsche 13). In another way, Conrad's linguistic and cognitive scepticisms in *Lord Jim* look forward, too, towards developments in the life of the early twentieth century which before long had key effects in shaping modernist imagination.

In 1900, large numbers of the world's population went through life seldom encountering an accent or dialect from far beyond their place of birth, and still less often a language from another country. Experience of Conrad's kind, international and multilingual, was still rare. Yet it became much less so in Europe during the next three decades, as a result of factors including military life abroad during the Great War, the upheaval of peoples that ensued, and the general increase in travel and tourism that marked the 1920s. Understanding of the nature and reliability of language inevitably changed as a result, in ways influentially defined by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). For Saussure, the use of different sound patterns, in different languages, to represent the same object – ultimately, "the very existence of different languages" – confirmed his conclusion that "*the linguistic sign is arbitrary*"; by extension, that a "broad gulf" inevitably separates word and world (Saussure 67-8). For the many exiles and émigrés among modernist writers, arbitrariness of this kind was simply a daily feature of life abroad – contributing to self-consciousness about their own language, and, potentially, to a freedom for formal or linguistic experiment in their writing. In T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), for example, or in some of Ernest Hemingway's early work, that murmur of foreign languages and cultures so noticeable in *Lord Jim* becomes still more audible. The last line of *Ulysses* (1922) – not "yes I will Yes," but "*Trieste-Zürich-Paris, 1914-1921*" – likewise suggests how far James Joyce's exile (and work abroad as a language teacher) may have contributed to his extravagant linguistic experimentation throughout the preceding pages of his novel (Joyce 933).

Conrad's fluency in three languages, in other words – along with his exile from Poland, and world-wandering life as a seaman – equipped him ideally to initiate language-centred concerns and developments typifying modernism. His early experience also contributed to further anticipations of modernist literature. These include his fiction's transition from authorial omniscience towards subjective vision, discussed earlier, and its development of the kind of anachronies later so marked in the writing of Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust. Professional life as a ship's officer – eventually captain – obviously demanded extensive navigational skills, involving Conrad in exigent, daily encounters with the Greenwich-based temporalities which were beginning to regulate the modern industrial world increasingly stringently. In his professional career as a novelist, Conrad often favoured imaginative alternatives to these exacting temporalities, developed through looping structures and frequently non-chronological ordering in novels such as *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent*.

In a letter to Conrad, reflecting on his unusual career, Henry James suggests how far his success in fiction, and, indirectly, his anticipation of modernist idioms, may have been facilitated by “the prodigy of [his] past experience” – by his youth and his life at sea. This early experience conferred on Conrad “an authority that no one has approached,” James remarks, adding that “no one has *known* – for intellectual use – the things you know” (James 419). Such views might seem inadvertently unflattering, suggesting that it was principally the uniqueness of Conrad's experience that accounted for his literary achievement. Obviously, on the contrary, not every mariner experiencing the exigent temporalities of life at sea, or the polyglot community of shipboard life, later becomes an innovative novelist, nor do all émigrés who are required to master multiple languages in their early lives. Yet any novelist – or any judge of literature – might acquiesce in the French lieutenant's credo: “one does what one can (*on fait ce qu'on peut*).” Conrad certainly agreed, using exactly that phrase, “one does what one can,” in a letter of 1903, as a kind of apology for his writing generally (Conrad, *Collected Letters* III, 90). Whatever “intellectual use” may later be involved, original experience plays a primary role in what can be done in fiction – what can be

imagined, and how the world can be formed and reconstructed by the writer. Little in his experience may have equipped Conrad as a humourist, or, if Hervouet and Jasanoff are right, as a portraitist of women's fashion or appearance. It was instead Conrad's extraordinary fortune that early experience provided him so extensively, and so precisely, with the basis of imaginative resources essential for comprehending a modern globalising age, and soon so central to the innovative achievements of modernism. As Fredric Jameson concludes, "Conrad marks ... a strategic fault line in the emergence of contemporary narrative ... in Conrad we can sense the emergence ... of what will be contemporary modernism" (Jameson 206). As he suggests, Conrad's significance as a translator is much less to do with language than with literary history. It lies in his translation of nineteenth-century literary conventions towards those required by a new century, and in his indication of the seismic pressures of modernity – on language, and on experience generally – that made these new tactics and structures so essential.

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